

Jagannath's Mercy

On Aurangzeb

In Orissa there is a little-known history that undeniably demonstrates that Lord Jagannath is the most merciful and compassionate. It describes how he bestowed his causeless mercy on one of the most hated and feared despots to ever walk on this planet. If in the course of giving mercy the Lord is not kind to even those who consider him an enemy, then how can he truly be the most merciful?

Born on 4th November 1618, Muhiuddin Muhammad Aurangzeb Bahadur Alamgir, more commonly known as Aurangzeb, reigned with an iron fist over most of India for 48 years. To obtain the Moghul throne, Aurangzeb killed his elder brother and imprisoned his father, Shah Jahan, who then died in captivity eight years later. His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada mentions this in his purport to *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam* 10.1.67:

We have seen in the history of India that Aurangzeb killed his brother and nephews and imprisoned his father to fulfill political ambitions. There have been many similar instances, and Kamsa was the same type of king. Kamsa did not hesitate to kill his nephews and imprison his sister and his father. For demons to do such things is not astonishing.

The historian A. F. Rudolf Hoernie has described Aurangzeb's rule in his *A History of India*:

[Aurangzeb] was an intolerant Muhammadan of the Sunni sect. He was a pronounced image [deity] breaker and the relentless persecutor of all who belonged to a different faith.¹

Breaker of Temples

Amongst his significant atrocities, in 1669 Aurangzeb destroyed the 250 foot high temple on the site of Krishna's appearance place in Mathura. After demolishing it, Aurangzeb built a mosque on the site. Following that, in 1670 he ordered the destruction of the Keshava Rai temple in Mathura, and in its place again erected a mosque. Srila Prabhupada mentions this incident in his purport to *Caitanya-caritāmṛta, madhya* 17.156:

At one time, Keshavaji Mandir was attacked by the emperor Aurangzeb, who constructed such a big mosque there that the temple of Keshavaji was insignificant in comparison.

The *Maasir-i-'Alamgiri*, an Islamic history book from the time, describes that the deities from the Keshavaji temple were carried to Agra and buried under the steps of a mosque so that they would be continually stepped on by the Islamic pilgrims.² The former Magistrate of Mathura District and British historian F. S. Growse notes that Aurangzeb was not content with demolishing the most sacred temple of the city. Deciding to also destroy the name of the metropolis, he decreed that henceforth Mathura should be called Islamabad.³

Later in 1670, Aurangzeb is said to have been standing on the wall of his fort in Agra when he noticed a bright light burning in the distance. Upon inquiry he was informed that it was a ghee lamp on top of the Radha Govinda temple 55 km (34 miles) away in Vrindavan. Furious that this Hindu shrine was taller than any Muslim building around, Aurangzeb ordered its destruction. Fortunately, the devotees in Vrindavan were forewarned, and by the time Aurangzeb's soldiers arrived, Govindadev and all the important deities of Vrindavan had been moved to safer places. Aurangzeb's men dismantled the top floors of the Govindaji temple, desecrated the sanctum sanctorum, and mutilated all the stone carvings within the temple.

Aurangzeb then converted the temple into a mosque, where in order to complete his work of destruction, he offered prayers to Allah. Aurangzeb's additions to the building were later removed by Magistrate F. S. Growse and the temple was restored to the Vaishnava community in 1871.⁴ In 1688, Aurangzeb sent his men back to Mathura, where it is estimated that they destroyed around 1,000 temples.

The Govindaji temple was not the only *mandir* in Vraja that was attacked by Aurangzeb's men. On his order, his soldiers also damaged and contaminated Sanatan Goswami's temple of Madan Mohan and many other structures. It was to save them from his violence that the main deities of Vrindavan, including Radha Gopinath, Madan Mohan, Gopal, who is also famous as Sri Nathji, Radha Damodar, and others left and went to various places in Rajasthan.

Attacking Orissa and Puri

Lord Jagannath and the temples of Orissa were also not spared the wrath of Aurangzeb. The *Muraq'at-i-Abu'l Hasan* is a collection of records and documents compiled by Maulana Abu'l Hasan, one of Aurangzeb's officers in Bengal and Orissa. There it mentions that when Aurangzeb was informed of a new Hindu temple that had been constructed in Midnapur in the south-western part of West Bengal. He issued the following order to all civil officers and government agents from Cuttack, Orissa, to Midnapur:

You are commanded with extreme urgency that immediately upon receipt of this letter you should destroy all the above-mentioned temples. Every idol house built during the last 10 or 12 years, whether with brick or clay, should be demolished without delay. Also, do not allow the crushed Hindus and despicable infidels to repair their old temples. Reports of the destruction of temples should be sent to the court under the seal of the kazis and attested by pious sheikhs.

In 1686, Aurangzeb appointed Nasar Khan as the Subadar of Cuttack. Nasar Khan was strongly anti-Hindu. He destroyed

many temples and replaced them with mosques. Eventually Nasar Khan took an army of soldiers and started off for Puri, intending to destroy the temple and build a large mosque in its stead. The group stopped half-way to Puri at the village of Danda Mukundapur where they prepared to take rest and continue their journey the next day. The *Kaṭaka-rāja-vamśāvali*, a history of the Puri kings and the temple of Jagannath, relates the amazing incident that followed. That night, lightning struck the army of Nasar Khan and killed a number of elephants and horses, etc. Frightened and considering the storm to be the work of the Hindus' God, Jagannath, they made a peace treaty with the Orissan king and departed.⁵ Lord Jagannath's temple remained safe for the time being.

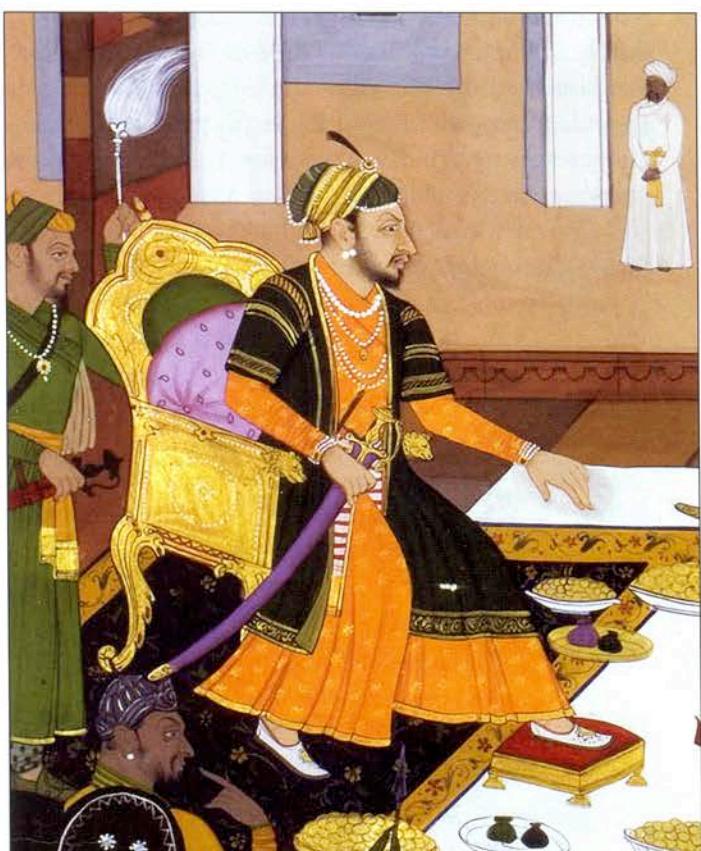
Jagannath in Hiding

Displeased with their lack of results, in 1691 Aurangzeb again ordered an attack on Jagannath's temple and a halt to the *Ratha-yātrā* festival. This time he sent his general Nawab Ikram Khan, the nephew of former Emperor Akbar.⁶

The Mogul history book *Tabsirat-ul-Naizirin* and the Oriya chronicles, *Mādalā-pañji* and *Cakaḍā-poñthī* all give accounts of this attack. The *Kaṭaka-rāja-vamśāvali* describes that upon hearing news of the approaching army, the Khurda King Gajapati Divyasingh Dev (1688-1716)⁷ sent a spy to appraise the size of Ikram Khan's forces. The sobering report came back: The invading army of Muslims consisted of 25,000 horses, 1,200 elephants, 2,000 camels, and 100,000 foot-soldiers. The Muslims stormed the temple of Jagannath, broke and blockaded both the eastern Lion-gate and southern Horse-gate, removed the *cakra* from the top of the *bhoga-mandapa* temple, and carried away what the *Kaṭaka-rāja-vamśāvali* describes as "four wooden statues".⁸

The Bengali historian Dineshchandra Sen spoke of this incident, "Ikram Khan destroyed two of the chief gates of the temple... Two brilliant diamonds that formed the eyes of Jagannath were seized by the Nawab and sent to Aurangzeb."⁹

Jamal Khan, Ikram Khan's brother, committed blasphemy by climbing onto Jagannath's altar and sitting on the Lord's throne. Unable to defeat Ikram Khan's superior forces and wanting to avoid the bloodshed of the people of Orissa, Maharaja Divyasingh gave Ikram Khan the wooden horses and chariot drivers from the *Ratha-yātrā* carts. The *Kaṭaka-rāja-vamśāvali* (94) states that the four wooden statues that King Divyasingh gave Ikram Khan were duplicate and uninstalled deities of Jagannath to be presented to Aurangzeb. The idea was to trick the emperor



Aurangzeb

into thinking that Ikram Khan had been successful in his mission, that Jagannath had been destroyed. Meanwhile, Maharaja Divyasingh took the original deities to a hidden room behind the temple of goddess Bimala, where the worship secretly continued.

Believing that the deity they had captured of Jagannath was the "real one", the raiding party threw it on the steps of a mosque so that every Muslim who passed on his way to prayer could kick it. In this way it was considered that the Hindus would be humiliated by seeing their god abused.

Ratha-yatra Stopped

Still, Aurangzeb was not satisfied. He wanted to see the *Ratha-yātrā* festival halted once and for all. He accordingly instructed his general, Mir Sayyid Muhammad¹⁰ of Bilgram to go to Orissa. Mir Sayyid was ordered to station troops on all the major roadways and to not allow any pilgrims to go to Puri for the *Ratha-yātrā*.

For the following twelve years from 1691 to 1703, Jagannath's worship in Puri was conducted secretly without bells or the routine blowing of horns¹¹ at the time of the *bhoga* offerings. There was a small entrance on the southern side of the temple boundary wall where priests would go through a tunnel at night to make offerings to the deities. Festivals, including the summer boat festival known as *Candana-yātrā* and the kidnapping of Rukmini, *Rukmiṇī-haraṇa*, were stopped. The *Snāna-yātrā* festival was quietly observed on Jagannath's throne, and the *Ratha-yātrā* was enacted in the *bhoga-maṇḍapa*, the large area where *bhoga* is offered to Jagannath.

Barred by the army of Mir Sayyid, the pilgrims stopped coming to Puri. The *Kaṭaka-rāja-vaiśāvali* relates that without the funds from visiting pilgrims, prices shot up and a recession set in. Meanwhile, all of the devoted inhabitants of Orissa became greatly depressed due to not being able to see their beloved Jagannath. The *Cakāḍā-pōñthī*, a book of Oriya history, describes that Puri looked as desolate as a cremation ground.



Allah appeared in a dream to Aurangzeb as Jagannath

Jagannath's Mercy

Who can understand the causeless mercy of Jagannath? In spite of all the above mentioned atrocities, Aurangzeb received what millions of faithful devotees of Jagannath only aspire for — *darśana* of the Lord.

After twelve years¹² of spiritual and economical depression in Puri, a devotee of Lord Nrisimhadev named Sri Rama Dayita Goswami, also known as Dinanath, a local Mahant, left to seek the Emperor's permission for having the *Ratha-yātrā* again. Meanwhile, Aurangzeb had a dream in which he saw *khoda*, his Muslim god, manifest as the merciful Jagannath, ordering him to allow the *Ratha-yātrā* festival to go on.

The next morning, just as Aurangzeb was contemplating the dream, Rama Dayita Goswami arrived and requested him to allow the chariot festival to resume. Astonished by the series of events, and touched by the mercy of Jagannath, Aurangzeb had a change of heart. To purify himself of his offenses,

the Emperor donated to the temple of Jagannath some property at Markandapur Tahasil, where the present-day Khurda Road Junction railway station is situated — an amazing change of policy for the person who was at one time determined to break the Jagannath temple. The documents certifying Aurangzeb's property donation to the Jagannath Mandir are still available in the Orissan Government Archives.



Document from Aurangzeb
donating property to Jagannath

When Murshid Quli Khan became the governor of Orissa in 1703, he removed the ban on *Ratha-yātrā*. Gajapati Divyasingh Dev joyfully had new chariots made and celebrated the *Ratha-yātrā* festival in a magnificent way. That year, *vaiṣṇavas* from Puri's 59 *māṭhas* took part in the car festival and observed exuberant *sankirtan*.

Aurangzeb died in 1707 at the age of 88 of unknown causes. Considering the activities of his life, some of his final words are very striking:

I came alone and I go as a stranger. I do not know who I am nor what I have been doing. I have sinned terribly, and I do not know what punishment awaits me.¹³

Bury this wanderer in the Valley of Deviation from the Right Path with his head bare. Because every ruined sinner who is conducted bare-headed before the Grand Emperor (i.e. God) is sure to be an object of mercy.¹⁴

Considering the above makes one wonder: Was Aurangzeb's mood of anguished humility and repentance at the end of his life related to his life-long absorption in Krishna, albeit in an inimical mood? Could it have been connected with his encounter with the all-merciful Jagannath?

It is not unthinkable that the Lord of kindness may show causeless mercy to the greatest sinner or even to one who had considered the Lord his enemy. Kamsa obtained Krishna's mercy by his fear, Sishupal and other inimical kings by envy. As described by Narada Muni

to Yudhisthir Maharaja in *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam* (7.1.29):

evam kṛṣṇe bhagavati māyā-manuja iśvare
vairena pūta-pāpmānas tam āpur anucintayā

If the conditioned souls somehow or other think of Krishna, who appeared by his own energy in his eternal humanlike form, they will become purified from their sins. Whether thinking of him as their worshipable Lord or an enemy, because of constantly thinking of him they will attain him. 

Notes

- 1 Page 106.
- 2 Cited in Mathura — A District Memoir, p. 37. The original pages written in Persian from Maasir-i-Alamgiri, dealing with this incident can be found in the Bikaner Museum, Rajasthan, India, and on the website <http://www.aurangzeb.info/>
- 3 F. S. Growse, p. 35. Although decreed by Aurangzeb, the policy never caught on and local people continued calling it Mathura.
- 4 Prafull Goradia. Hindu Masjids.
- 5 *Kaṭaka-rāja-vāṁśāvali*, 93.
- 6 Ikram Khan seems to have been a trusted agent. A few years earlier (1689 AD), on the order of Aurangzeb, the Khan had built the Jami Masjid mosque at Balu Bazar in Cuttack.
- 7 The Khurda kings were entrusted with the care and worship of Lord Jagannath. They later shifted their base to Puri and ruled from there.
- 8 *Kaṭaka-rāja-vāṁśāvali*, 94.
- 9 The Bengali Ramayanas, p. 233.
- 10 Not to be confused with the Sufi master and religious theologian of the same name.
- 11 Called a *kāhāli*, these traditional horns are about 4 feet long, made from brass, very thin and taper gradually larger from the mouth to a wide bugle-like end.
- 12 1691 to 1703 as described above.
- 13 Comment to his second son Muhammad a few days before he passed away.
- 14 Fourth instruction in his last will.



Aurangzeb at the end of his life

श्री कृष्णकथामृत